

A RARE VIEW OF POLITICS BEHIND BARS

The Oregonian, (Portland, OR) - Thursday, December 24, 1992

Author: STEVE DUIN - of the Oregonian Staff

Sometimes, much to Dave Werschkul's regret, there is room at the inn.

There was room for him in Gold Beach, and talking about that hospitality -- almost a year later -- doesn't do much to fill Werschkul with Christmas spirit.

But his story should provide some holiday cheer for state Sen. Peg Jolin, Rep. Kelly Clark, and yes, even Sen. Bob Packwood. For his crimes and indiscretions, Werschkul went where none of them have gone, or plan to go:

He went to jail.

Of all the politicians who have erred recently, Werschkul is the least infamous. The same could be said for his crimes.

The former Curry County commissioner was not found guilty of 15 counts of undue influence and theft, as Jolin was. He did not plead guilty to misdemeanor charges of trespass and sexual abuse, as Clark did.

And Werschkul didn't leave his fingerprints on a dozen unsuspecting women, as Packwood admits he has done.

No, Werschkul simply forged his wife's name on a mail-in ballot, then lied about doing so. Because the former is a felony, Werschkul was not allowed to duck out of sight and lick his wounds in private.

Instead, he spent 10 days in stir.

Experts on jailhouse room availability argue that Werschkul's misfortune was to commit his crimes in Curry County. The only reason Jolin didn't serve time is that the Lane County jail is overbooked.

No one is arguing, I hope, that the world is a more dangerous place because Jolin and Clark escaped with probation, fines, and community service.

But the world didn't become a less dangerous one when Werschkul disappeared behind bars. Many politicians may deserve the whip of that humiliation, but only Werschkul has felt the lash.

Werschkul's problems began on the roof of his Agness farm in March, 1991. That's where his wife, Sue, was standing, and cleaning their chimney, when she slipped and fell to the ground, breaking her back.

She was recovering from surgery in a Medford hospital two days later, when Werschkul asked

her if he should sign the ballot that had arrived for her in the mail.

The ballot was for Werschkul's recall from his seat on the county board of commissioners. Werschkul was never one of the good ol' boys of county politics and the recall -- which failed miserably -- was the good ol' boys' revenge.

Sue Werschkul told him to sign her name. She had other worries.

A curiously alert county election worker noticed that Sue Werschkul's signature didn't match the one on file. Asked to explain, both Werschkuls insisted Sue had signed her own ballot.

Why the lie? "Politicians by nature are geared not to admit mistakes," Werschkul said. "We are programmed not to be candid. We're programmed to hedge our comments, and in my case, the hedging turned out to be a bald-faced lie."

Bad as that was, Werschkul never thought he'd end up in jail. The sinners in spousal signature cases never do. But on Nov. 26, 1991, Werschkul was found guilty of making a false statement.

Circuit Court Judge Richard Barron could have treated the offense as a misdemeanor. Instead, he hammered Werschkul with a felony -- which led to his removal from office -- and sent him to jail.

The jail at Gold Beach ain't San Quentin, but neither is it San Clemente. Werschkul was locked up in a 30-foot by 30-foot dorm room with 10 other guys, most of whom were hibernating on substance-abuse charges.

The lack of privacy was brutal, but the food wasn't bad and the company was tolerable. "There was only one person with a real mean streak," Werschkul said. This guy, he added, had a giant tattoo of a sex scene on his back and spent a good part of the seemingly endless days wondering where he could find a good wife.

"When I dwell on this now," Werschkul says, "it doesn't take me to some place I want to be. The biggest punishment that comes from this is the public ridicule."

Doug Marker, who once worked with him in Rep. Peter DeFazio's office, reminds us that Werschkul, a moderate in a reactionary neck of the woods, got into politics for the rarest of reasons: "He had a real sense of mission, as opposed to other people who like the lights."

One mistake, and that mission ran aground. Werschkul knows he screwed up, but he also knows far more about the odd equation of crime and punishment than Jolin or Packwood ever will.

That he still feels capable of being ridiculed tells me that he didn't need to be.